Telephone interview with Sgt. James Sartorelli, former corporal with Weapons Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division. Wounded in action in Korea. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 8 January 2002.

When did you go to Korea?

I went to Korea in ’52 and returned in ’53. I spent 13 months there.

Were you a rifleman?

Yes. I also trained in the states with machine guns and the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle). When I got to Korea I was assigned to a weapons company. I also trained with the rocket and flame thrower. I was in the flame thrower and rocket section.

Were you issued a flak vest when you got to Korea?

We got them when we got up on the line in June of ’52. Being in a weapons company, we used to catch a lot of flak. When the enemy knew we were coming, they called in everything on us--artillery, mortars, plus rifle and automatic weapons fire..

What did the flak vests look like?

They looked like a big vest and they came down to your waist. They had hard sections built in to protect your chest and back. Mine took a hand grenade.

Tell me about that.

On 23 August ‘52, early in the morning (1:00 am), we were sent out to reinforce Fox Company in holding Bunker Hill for 3 days. The weather was extremely foggy. It was so foggy, in fact, that we had to hang on to each other’s shirt tails. We were loaded down with our heavy and light machine guns, flame throwers, rockets and ammunition. They told us not to talk or make a sound.

Suddenly, the sergeant in front of me stopped. I didn’t see him, so I ran into him. When I stopped, the guy behind me did the same thing and ran into me. All of went over the edge of a ravine and the whole damn mess of us landed one on top of the other. The sergeant and I were on the bottom of the pile. I was carrying a pack of rocket ammunition on my back at the time and my assistant had the flame thrower and tank. I thought my back had been broken.

Because it had been raining steadily, we lay there in 6 inches of water. Every time I tried to get my head above the water, someone else would topple over the edge of the ravine, land on me and push my head under. The only one who wasn’t hurt was our corpsman.

I began swearing and hollering from the pain and the corpsman kept telling me to quiet down because there were gooks around. But I was in so much pain, I told him to let them come. I’d rather get shot than bear the pain I had in my back. I couldn’t even sling my rifle after that. I had to hold it the way you might carry a dinner pail. We were in the ravine for a half hour to an hour before a scout came and led us to Bunker Hill.

On 23 and 24 August ‘52, there was no action because it was too foggy and rainy so, in our area, a bunker was built and foxholes were sandbagged.

On 25 August ‘52 it cleared off and one of our men stood up to stretch and that was it. He was shot and killed immediately. I can’t even remember his name. When you were over there you didn’t have buddies; they didn’t last long. I was assigned to a machine gun bunker, but was called back. Our sergeant, who landed in the ravine with us, was sent back to the MLR

because his injured leg was giving him problems. So I was put in the sergeant's place in charge of our squad.

As it got dark, we started getting incoming artillery, mortars, and enemy fire. I was in a two-man fox hole with a BAR man and there were four or five men spread out in one-man fox holes. Off to the right was a light machine gun bunker which I found out later got a direct hit by an artillery shell. Two were killed in that fox hole and one got a concussion. That's when the gooks started attacking our line.

On the left, we had another fox hole position with a light machine gun in it. When they opened up firing, they drew enemy fire and we fired back. While the machine gun was firing, the gooks threw in concussion hand grenades to knock it out. At that time, flares were going up and I saw a hand grenade roll down the gunner's back as he ducked and held on to the machine gun. The grenade blew him and his partner out of the hole. I thought they were both killed, but a few minutes later they were packing up their machine gun and moving up to a fox hole closer to the enemy. I later heard that it was a lieutenant who was in the fox hole with him. The flak jackets they wore saved them.

I soon ran out of ammo, so I went back to our ammo bunker to replenish my supply. But we had caught so much incoming from the enemy and even our own artillery that our ammo bunker had been blown up. So I was forced to pick up ammunition scattered on the ground.

What were you looking for, .30 caliber clips for your M1?

That's right. I could only pick up so much and then I had to get back to my fox hole. As I was going back up the hill, the enemy began throwing hand grenades over. You could see them flipping through the air with sparks coming from the handles. They were like those German potato masher grenades with the wooden handles. They overthrew us with most of them because they were easier to throw than our grenades.

Could you see them throwing the grenades?

They couldn't have been more than 20 feet from us. Usually they had one guy that carried them in a pack on his back. And another guy would throw them. They worked as a team. Anyway, I dove for my fox hole but a grenade had gotten there ahead of me and I landed right on top of it. It exploded against my chest and blew me right back out where I started from. My flak jacket was all torn to pieces. These were concussion rather than fragmentation grenades, otherwise I wouldn't have survived.

Nevertheless, a fragment hit me in the throat. As I lay in the cold mud, I could feel my hand get warm. I reached around my throat and found a hole. I stuck my finger in it to stop the bleeding. I cursed a while figuring that I had had it. Then I yelled for a corpsman and someone called back and said,"If you can swear that much, your throat can't be that bad"

I then went back to a bunker which had been turned into an aid station. It was loaded with wounded. The only way I could get fixed was to stick just my head in the door. A corpsman looked at the wound in my neck, bandaged it, and told me not to move my head because the shrapnel was against my jugular vein. He was afraid it would cut it and I would bleed to death. He told me to watch another Marine in a bunker nearby who had a concussion and needed to be watched so he wouldn't be wandering around.

The battle was still going on. I got hit around 11:00 pm and we got off the hill the next morning, 26 August '52, just as it was getting light. Five from our group who were wounded

were able to help each other back to the MLR. Because of the land mines, I helped the guy with the concussion to stay on the path.

Where did they take you then?

The real badly wounded were flown out to a field hospital. The rest of us who didn't look too bad were taken off the line in amtracs to a field hospital. The doctors there didn't know whether to take the shrapnel out of m throat or leave it in, because it was right next to the jugular. But they figured that if they sent me back, my neck might move and jugular would be severed. So finally they took it out right there. I was put on the hospital ship USS *Repose* and later flown to Naval Hospital Yokosuka, Japan

How old were you at that time?

I was 23, the old man of the bunch.

Do you remember the date you were hit?

It was 25 August '52.

So, you figure it was that flak vest that saved your life?

Oh, yes. It was that flak jacket that did it. Otherwise, that grenade would have finished me off. If a burp gun bullet hit you on an angle, the flak jacket would mostly deflect it. If it hit you straight on, some would wound you and some would kill you. When we were attacked, we would call in an air burst and catch the gooks out in the open. The flak jackets protected us from most of the shrapnel although there were some who were wounded or killed by it.